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What argumentation (theory) can do for philosophy in the 21st century

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ABSTRACT: The author holds that the old theory according to which philosophy is the matrix of argumentation studies must be entirely reviewed currently. He argues that argumentation theory, as an interdisciplinary domain, may start playing, in new terms, the role which – in the Cartesian tree – was that of philosophy as the trunk of the different branches of human knowledge, as long as a set of requirements, which he lists, were met.

KEYWORDS: argumentation, interdisciplinarity, logic, multidisciplinary, Perelman, philosophy, post-modernity, relativism, rhetoric, Toulmin.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most remarkable particularities of argumentation studies today is that they are shared by researchers coming from a wide range of disciplines, including philosophy itself: linguistics, speech communication, sociology, legal theory, etc. These studies begin, then, by being markedly multidisciplinary. This situation is not new in the history of rhetoric and argumentation from the times of classical antiquity, but the current situation has historical and (I would say) philosophical characteristics that are very unique and to which we should pay very special attention. The first of these is that, according to what seems to be the way they are generally perceived, these matters are no longer some among so many others in the scope of human knowledge, as was thought in the past (until the second half of the 20th century, at least, and Perelman and Toulmin in particular), but they are somehow essential or fundamental; to the degree that, from a certain point of view, everything can be interpreted in light of them or from their perspective, they are at the core of knowledge itself as a whole. In this multidisciplinary context, philosophy itself does not occupy any place of distinction or privilege : it is just one more among the various and diverse contributions to the multidisciplinary field of argumentation, to that which has come to be commonly referred to as "argumentation theory".

Everything I have just said is generally assumed to be given by those who dedicate to the study of argumentation. In *Fundamentals of Argumentation Theory*, argumentation study is seen "as a discipline in its own right [note these words] nourished by the combined efforts of philosophers, logicians, linguists, (speech)

communication specialists, psychologists, lawyers, and others.” (van Eemeren et al., 1996, p. 12) And Ralph Johnson refers to argumentation theory as a “multidisciplinary investigation” that involves these and other areas (2000, p. 31). But let it be said from the start that this status of argumentation theory is very problematic and disturbing for most professional philosophers, because philosophy, until recently in its millennial history, never limited itself to being or pretending to be merely a *partial* contribution to anything, but quite to the contrary, claimed for itself the status of a special and privileged knowledge that would be the foundation for all others and would be the true paradigm of rationality. Indeed, it is a very curious fact that even the “end” or the “death of philosophy” itself was announced, at a certain point in the past century, by philosophers who previously had followed a foundationalist path (like Quine, and others). It is in light of that status, as I will show later on, that we should understand Perelman and Toulmin’s conceptions of rhetoric and argumentation. Some contemporary theorists of argumentation (in the ambit of informal logic, for example), who began by being philosophers in their academic training, officially ceased to be so, and began claiming the precise condition of *argumentation theorists*, at times casting a suspicious eye on the philosophical approach to rhetoric and argumentation. I would say that the discovery and colonization of the continent of argumentation led them to put in parentheses, if not forget, the path that took them there.

Now, whatever the “argumentation theory” itself may be is far from clear, not only in regard to the object of such theory and its transversality, but above all in regard to its (necessary) *interdisciplinarity*. Significantly, this last term/concept rarely appears when argumentation theorists delve into the nature and meaning of their own work. But it is interdisciplinarity, and not the multidisciplinary I began by alluding to, that must inevitably be at the source of the very concept of “argumentation theory”, considering that such a concept must have *from the outset* a systematic and even programmatic approach, as in fact the authors of *Fundamentals of Argumentation Theory* suggest when they refer to a “division of labor” or address the status and scope of logic in such division (van Eemeren et al., 1996, p. 5 ff.). Limiting myself to the aspects that are, without a doubt, the most relevant : there is, ideally at least, *one*, not various argumentation theories, to which we all contribute, and if there are no concepts and perspectives that are common to the various contributions that are susceptible of being elaborated on and developed, then there is no sense in our speaking of one single theory. How do each of these various contributions to the multidisciplinary field of argumentation effectively contribute to it ? How do these contributions relate to each other and intercross among themselves ? What greater or lesser primacy can (or should) be attributed to one/some of them in particular (as would be the case of philosophic contributions) ? These are (metatheoretical) questions that apparently have not been answered by argumentation theorists up to the present time. However, as I will attempt to suggest, they are essential questions; it is through the answer to these questions that the (new) status of philosophy within the framework of the so-called “argumentation theory” will be defined.

2. PHILOSOPHY AS THE (OLD) MATRIX OF ARGUMENTATION STUDIES

That the questions I have just raised are of the greatest importance is something that can be immediately attested by the very history of rhetoric and argumentation from the second half of the 20th century to our days. Perelman and Toulmin were philosophers and saw philosophy precisely as being the fundamental matrix of argumentation studies (Ribeiro, 2009, pp. 34-37). This is to say right from the start that when they speak to us about rhetoric and argumentation, what they are talking about at first hand is philosophy, and essentially a philosophy that, as a whole, will be completely reduced to rhetoric and argumentation *per se* (Ribeiro, 2012a, p. 162 ff.). In other words, what were, before them, different and separate fields of philosophy, such as metaphysics, the theory of knowledge or epistemology, ethics, political philosophy, for example, are now revolutionarily considered by them as domains of a single field or fundamental territory, which is precisely that of argumentation theory (see Perelman, 1969, p. 1 ff.; and Toulmin, 1958, p. 211 ff.). With them, this theory is no longer a simple discipline of philosophy among others, as was the case in the past; it is Philosophy itself, or all that — in the context in which the works *The New Rhetoric* and *The Uses of Argument* were published, and which is, roughly speaking, that of the announced end of philosophy and the beginning of the so-called “post-modernity” — it can and ought to be. This is about a genuine (though silent) revolution that, as I have suggested elsewhere (Ribeiro, 2012b, pp. 1-11), has no parallel in the history of western ideas since ancient Greece.

As is the case, with the first author especially, they expressly acknowledge the multidisciplinary of argumentation studies, but they never gave up the idea that philosophy — or a *new philosophy*, following the revolution I alluded to — was of necessity the path to its interdisciplinary framework (e.g., in regard to sociology or legal theory). In truth, in the sixties and seventies of the last century, but not without some surprise on the part of both, they were the first to confront the phenomenon of multidisciplinary and the response of both to it was precisely that *philosophy, as argumentation theory, would constitute this type of fundamental framework*. Only philosophy, thus conceived, would provide the metatheoretical and systematic concepts that would make it possible to merge the different disciplinary contributions. In Perelman (1989), in an article with the significant title “Recherches interdisciplinaires sur l’argumentation” [Interdisciplinary investigations on argumentation], the author describes in the following manner that which he calls “the bases of argumentation theory”:

An indispensable condition for the fecundity of interdisciplinary research is the existence of a theory that guarantees, once and for all, the terminology and the perspectives of the empirical or experimental studies. Without such a theory, each discipline runs the risk of examining different phenomena or, at least, phenomena that would be difficult to determine at what points they would correspond to those who study another discipline. (p. 383, my translation)

In the perspective of this interdisciplinarity — which only philosophy made possible — it could even be conceived, ultimately, that philosophy itself—in the *disciplinary* and *professional* sense of the term — would appear as a contribution to

argumentation theory. This is what Perelman (1989) tells us in regard to the notion of “reasonable”, which in his conception performs the metatheoretical and systematic function of an interdisciplinary concept:

Psychology, psycho-pathology and philosophy could without a doubt help us to specifically determine the notion of *reasonable*, which is not conceived except in the context of an argumentation. What is a reasonable choice or decision ? What is it to rationalize or present as reasonable that which is not actually reasonable ? [...] Can the notion of reasonable be expressed or defined in psychological, sociological or philosophical terms ? Do these various points of view intercross or overlap only partially ? (p. 393, my translation)

In Toulmin, in turn, it is precisely the type of systematic concepts Perelman refers to (the well-known distinction between “rational” and “reasonable”), and which only philosophy offers, that confers intelligibility to his conception of rhetoric and argumentation practically from *The Uses of Argument* to *Return to Reason*. But his perspective, in contrast, as especially the last book mentioned shows, did not address the interdisciplinarity of argumentation theory so much as with the idea that, after the so-called “end of philosophy”, this would take up again, in completely new terms, its universalist calling, presenting itself essentially as such (argumentation theory) (Toulmin, 2001, p. 12). In any case, for both of these authors, in our post-modern world philosophy would continue to be the basis of the foundations of rhetoric and argumentation, although in a form different from that which — in the past and practically since the famous “tree of knowledge” devised by *The Principles of Philosophy* (Descartes, 1644/1985, pp. 186-187) — it had been at the foundations of human knowledge in general. In this new context, if one can speak of any tree of this type, its trunk is precisely philosophy as *argumentation theory*, and its branches, those various multidisciplinary contributions to which I alluded.

As philosopher I would say then that both Perelman and Toulmin would probably, not *without strong reservations*, subscribe to our current understanding of the concept of “argumentation theory”, which reduces it to multidisciplinary without guaranteeing the necessary interdisciplinarity, and in the perspective of which philosophy will only make a contribution, among others and as valid and/or pertinent as they, to the field of that theory. The reason is that this conception, although placing argumentation at the top of the agenda (as both philosophers always defended), has as its backdrop the relativism to which the establishment of post-modernity led and, in particular, the collapse of the idea that there would be universal foundations for human knowledge in general, such as those that philosophy had previously provided. (It was such relativist position that J.-F. Lyotard (1979), in France, and R. Rorty (1979), in the USA, began to embrace in the seventies of the last century, but one which T. S. Kuhn (1962) and W. V. O. Quine (1953, 1969) had defended a decade earlier.) To the extent that the collapse I alluded to — and through which came the “end (or death) of philosophy” — implied putting philosophy into perspective, as a mere discipline among others in the academic *curricula*, and —in the case of argumentation theory — as a mere partial and limited approach to argumentation, our current understanding of the

multidisciplinarity of that theory would be ultimately unacceptable for both philosophers (Ribeiro, 2009, p. 35ff.). This is what Toulmin (2006), specifically, suggests to us in one of his last lectures:

[...] So, I welcome this occasion for a creative and constructive discussion of all these issues : in particular, the relationship between *what there is left for us under the heading of 'philosophy'*, and *what you yourselves are engaged in doing under the heading of 'the analysis of argumentation'*. Are these purely distinct activities, or are they ones which blend into one another at the margin ? This for me is the central question with which we are, and will continue to be, concerned for the rest of this week, and I look forward very much to hearing what you have to say about it. (p. 29, emphasis mine)

3. THE NEW ROLE OF ARGUMENTATION THEORY: A PLEA FOR INTERDISCIPLINARITY

As I read it, Toulmin's questions, although pertinent, were rhetorical *when applied to his own perspective*; there are not two distinct activities (philosophy and the "analysis of argumentation"), but only one: "the *philosophical* analysis of argumentation", which is what — as he says along the line of Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations* — "is left for us under the heading of 'philosophy'" (see Ribeiro, 2012c). It is, in other words, the "rhetoric of philosophy" to which Toulmin alludes (2001, p. 12). As a matter of fact, as I have already observed above, everything indicates that Toulmin's new concept of philosophy, after its "death", did not necessarily involve interdisciplinarity regarding rhetoric (see 2001, pp. 138-154, Ch. 9); but then, on the other hand and once again, it does not lead to multidisciplinarity and relativism.

Now, there is no doubt that the positioning of Perelman and Toulmin in regard to the role of philosophy in argumentation studies is, from the outset, metaphilosophical; it constitutes, we could say, a half-way point between traditional foundationalism and the bankruptcy of philosophy, the purpose in both cases being to prevent the drift into relativism. The dominant paradigm is still, in one form or another, the Cartesian tree, interpreted in this way or the other. Personally, as a philosopher, I have the greatest sympathy for this type of positioning, which I have defended in recent years in various published works I have been referring to (see Ribeiro, 2012d). However, I find I am forced to confess that, today, it corresponds to a conception that is purely ideal, and, in practical terms, completely inconsequential. My explanation is not some metaphilosophical argument (such as Quine's "ontological relativity"), but it is that the positioning referred to is not reconcilable or compatible with either the institutional reality of argumentation studies in western universities in general — where philosophy (logic included), in the face of the multidisciplinarity of argumentation teaching, has no prominent function or primacy — and, most of all, with that which, in conceptual and methodological terms, *we can minimally or realistically demand from philosophy itself*. Reason, or the "rational", as well as that which, in contrast, we understand by relativism and which Perelman and Toulmin called, in some contexts, the "reasonable" (Perelman, 1979, pp. 117-123; Toulmin, 1990, pp. 198-201), are not merely intellectual concepts for

philosophical use, but — as defended in *Cosmopolis* — notions that are socially, culturally and politically incorporated in our institutions, customs and values, and are therefore essentially sociological phenomena. It is from this point of view that the association between multidisciplinary and relativism must begin to be understood. The solution for the conflict between the two opposing fields (the “rational” and the “reasonable”) must, from the very start, come from a modest, pragmatic and feasible base, that makes argumentation theory viable as an interdisciplinary research program.

What I would like to suggest is that it is possible to perceive Perelman’s interdisciplinarity in new terms, without turning it into a mere replacement concept for that of philosophy, as the case seems to be with him, and safeguarding as much as possible the “rhetoric of philosophy” Toulmin speaks to us about, without (in turn) our being reduced to multidisciplinary and relativism, which is the way — in contrast with his views — we tend to interpret that concept today. The alternative implies completely renouncing the traditional scope of philosophy as a founding knowledge, and *naturalizing it*, by analogy with the naturalization of epistemology Quine speaks to us about in “Naturalized Epistemology” (1969, pp. 69-90) or with the naturalization of formal logic Ralph Johnson proposes (1996, pp. 76-86, Ch. 3). It was to such naturalization that, despite all the philosophical scruples coming from tradition (and which we should decidedly abandon today), both Perelman and (principally) Toulmin were already pointing towards in the last analysis. The philosopher, from this point of view, is on a par with the linguist, the sociologist, the legal theorist, etc., collaborating — with his own skills — in a common program that is supposed to be precisely that of an argumentation theory designed, from the start, in interdisciplinary terms. A good part of this interdisciplinarity had/has its origin, directly or indirectly in philosophy ; and the metatheoretical and systematic concepts of “rational” and “reasonable”, as the last works of those two authors suggest, continue to be philosophical tools that are indispensable for the purpose. Philosophy or “what is left of it”, as Toulmin would say, has everything to gain with this interdisciplinary participation in regard to a possible reformulation of the problems it deals with, or by expanding and probing deeper into those problems. Nevertheless, there will be no intellectual primacy on its part, nor, as a matter of fact and to the profound disappointment of traditional philosophers (among whom I include myself), any trunk common to the various branches of the (new) “argumentation tree”. If any analogy makes sense, in this respect, we have to search for it, not in botany, but in the biological models of social organisation, and particularly in the ecological ones, as Toulmin proposed (1990, pp. 191-192).

The interdisciplinary basis of argumentation theory is absolutely essential. We can do without it, and limit ourselves to multidisciplinary; but, probably, twenty or thirty years from now we will be doing the same thing and in the same unconnected and uncoordinated way as today. The “field of argumentation”, as Perelman (1970) called it, is extraordinarily divided in relation to a whole set of metatheoretical and systematic questions that require interdisciplinary research, the most well-known and vexing one perhaps being the one dealing with the opposition between rhetoric and dialectic, between a descriptive perspective of argumentation and another that is essentially normative, which are still, for the

majority of approaches, conceptions that are irreducible and irreconcilable between one another (see Ribeiro, 2013; and van Eemeren, 2013). In the past, the role of formal logic in argumentation theory constituted a question of this sort. We need new interdisciplinary concepts such as those Perelman and Toulmin, in their time, conceived, to unify what we ambiguously and confusedly call "argumentation theory", the most significant examples of which are, as I have said, those of "rational" and "reasonable". In the case of logic, for example, which from the first decades of the 20th century intended and claimed to be a paradigm of rationality, it was possible to achieve remarkable progress in the last twenty years, its contribution to the interdisciplinary field of argumentation theory being centred around the concept of *formal validity*. The old opposition between a formal logic and another that would be informal appears to have been overcome, and it is no longer an issue of real controversy. On the whole, the conclusion I come to (as philosopher) is that a good criterion for the acceptance of any particular theory in our field will be, then, the question of knowing whether or not it is interdisciplinary and/or has interdisciplinarity as its goal.

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